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081044Z Nov 04

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001832

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/08/2014

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SUBJECT: MALDIVES: REMAINING PRISON DETAINEES STAGE HUNGER STRIKE

REF: COLOMBO 1737 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: James F. Entwistle, Deputy Chief of Mission. 1.4(b,d)

11. (C) Summary: Eighteen of the 20-odd Maldivian detainees still in prison since the events of August 12-13 have reportedly gone on a hunger strike. The likely cause is the almost three month continuing detention, without charges, while most of the other detainees have been released or transferred to house arrest. Only nine people have been charged to date in connection with the August unrest and none of the charged are the expected "serious offenses." Maldivian government election officials have set December 31 as the date of the parliamentary elections and have indicated that anyone arrested or charged as a result of the August events will be allowed to campaign for a seat. If officials effectively address the complaints of those reportedly on hunger strike or under house arrest, as well as clarify whether these detainees can stand for elections, the government may be able to convince Maldivians of its commitment to reform and political openness. End Summary.

12. (C) HUNGER STRIKE: According to a statement released by the opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), detainees arrested after the August 12-13 protests have gone a hunger strike over their continued detention without charges. Mohamed Nasheed, a Colombo-based official with the MDP, estimated November 8 that 18 detainees, including at least one MP, are allegedly on the hunger strike, which began on November 4. At present, approximately 25 detainees remain incarcerated in connection with the August 12-13 civil unrest. (Note: As almost all Maldivians are Muslim and participate in the month-long Ramadan observance, the detainees were most probably following the traditional dawn-to-dusk fast of food and water before declaring their hunger strike.) The MDP official further added that the European Union was considering the possibility of issuing a public statement regarding the detainees' hunger strike.

13. (C) Ahmed Mujuthaba, Chair of the Human Rights Commission, told poloff November 8 that he had heard reports of detainees on a hunger strike, but could not confirm the information. His information had come from detainees' family members who had complained to the commission. Mujuthaba added that he hoped to visit the prison in the coming days to verify the stories. He surmised, however, that any hunger strike was likely in protest to their continued detention -- almost three months -- when most of the other detainees had been released or transferred to house or island (can't leave the island) arrest.

14. (C) FEW CHARGES FILED: As of November 7, Maldivian news reported that nine people, including one MP in the Special Majlis, had been charged in connection with the August 12-13 events. All the charges filed to date have related to civil disobedience-type crimes: unlawful assembly or disturbance of the peace. All interlocutors, including government officials, anticipate that more serious charges will be filed against some of those detainees released or under house arrest, but none have been able to give a time frame for the leveling of those more serious offenses.

15. (C) HOPE FOR UPCOMING ELECTIONS?: Government of the Republic of Maldives (GORM) election officials have set December 31 as the date for Majlis (parliamentary) elections. The candidates will have approximately one month to campaign. While the government has stated that MPs or others detained or charged since the unrest in August will be allowed to contest Majlis seats, there has not been any assurance from the government that those under house or island arrest will be allowed to campaign in their actual district. (The Maldivian constitution is clear, however, that convicted persons are not eligible to hold elected office.) The MDP's Nasheed stated that his "party" would field candidates for all 42 seats -- at present, 8 seats in the 50-person body are appointed by the President. He felt that the August 12-13 events had increased sympathy for the MDP, but admitted that Maldivians might be more afraid now to show that support in public. Also according to Nasheed, the Commonwealth Secretariat will send an official to Maldives in the coming weeks to evaluate the type and nature of any

election monitoring mission for the December 31 vote.

16. (C) COMMENT: While life and the political process have continued since the events in August, the government stands to lose any popular support for its prosecution of those involved the longer it plays with the rules of justice. Public opinion has already demonstrated that many are wary of the GORM's true commitment to reform, especially as officials have prohibited the Special Majlis MPs under house arrest from attending the meetings of the reform body. If contentions of a hunger strike at the prison are true, the GORM will have to act quickly to ward off any further protest from families and concerned citizens. Dealing with all the detainees in a timely manner, as well as publicly clarifying whether August detainees can stand in the December elections, might begin to convince Maldivians of the government's commitment to a more open, democratic environment. END COMMENT.  
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